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MARBLE HEADS—FRENCH—FIRST PART OF 16TH CENTURY

School of Michel Colombe

Gift of William G. Mather

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TWO MARBLE HEADS THE SCHOOL OF MICHEL COLOMBE

Gothic art in France endured four centuries, and it was inevitable that in that long period of time many modifications and changes should evolve. But, ever, it was shot through with that peculiar beauty of expression which has been the mark of French genius throughout the ages. The stiff, hieratic and monumental forms of the transition from the Romanesque developed into the perfect idealistic art of the thirteenth century. This idealism slowly waned and realism as slowly took its place, until in the early years of the fifteenth century the craftsmen of many regions produced sculptures entirely naturalistic in feeling. Portraiture had come into art instead of the thirteenth century idealism. The type was sought for, each statue being marked by individualistic treatment of feature and detail. No longer were there the great rows of prophets, saints and apostles, who, with slight modifications of feature and drapery, were to be differentiated only by the attributes which they carried. Instead every figure was individualized. This realism was to degenerate at times into extreme naïveté and caricature, symptoms which were certain marks of the decadence that had crept in.

However, there was to be again a recrudescence of the old fire and spirit. Gothic art had not as yet lost its vitality. Towards the end of the fifteenth century there seems to have been a slight infiltration of Italian artists into France, increasing in numbers as the years went on, but a group of artists developed who stubbornly retained, against this alien influence, many of the Gothic characteristics well into the early years of the sixteenth century. They stood for a time as a bulwark against the Italianization of French art.

Michel Colombe was the name around which this movement gathered. His fame has received a wider recognition than seems justified by his actually documented works, as only three works can be given to him with certainty. But without any doubt he was the leading spirit of the school of the Loire, or as it is called

in France, the "école tourangelle." This school and the school of Champagne still retained at this time the nobility of the earlier art.

The most famous of the early products of the region of the Loire are the sepulcher at Solesmes and in this country the Biron monuments in the J. Pierpont Morgan Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These monuments cannot be attributed to any artist but they show the characteristics which were to be brought into greater prominence by Michel Colombe himself in the famous tomb of Francis II, Duke of Brittany, in the Cathedral of Nantes. This magnificent work is a full expression of robust, direct and simple art. In it Colombe showed himself distinctly an artist of tradition. There is no abandoning of his conscientious realism, his calm dignity and restraint, for the flashy Italian brilliance of effect. These are the qualities which always distinguish the products of this school. There is never any straining for effect. There is instead always the charm of a simple, local type.

Through the generosity of William G. Mather the Museum has been able to add to its collection two heads of the finest quality, quite exceptional representatives of this late phase of Gothic art. They are typical of that influence which Michel Colombe exerted upon French sculpture. In them is a sense of repose full of restraint and distinction, an attitude that is one of reserve, and an elegance and simplicity which the exquisite surface of the marble only serves to accentuate. It is a retarding art, an art which, subtle in its beauty, could best hope to withstand the more obvious charms of the Italian style.

The heads are small in size* and both are modelled in the three-quarter round, the back being unfinished. In addition certain modifications show that they were to be seen in three-quarter profile. In the woman's head the hair is drawn back further on the side toward the observer and the actual structure of the head is altered to approximate visual correctness.

Their size and general character make it seem probable that they were broken at some time from figures, such as were customarily employed in the niches around the bases of the usual tomb of the day. Such tombs often had a mixture of Italianate and Gothic motifs, the tomb itself having been designed by

*Man's head, $5\frac{1}{2}$ " high x $4\frac{3}{4}$ " wide x $3\frac{1}{8}$ " deep.

Woman's head, $5\frac{3}{4}$ " high x $5\frac{3}{4}$ " wide x $3\frac{5}{8}$ " deep.

foreign workmen while the figures were made by an artist steeped in the French tradition. Such a tomb, it may be, was the provenance of these heads. They were perhaps from figures of saints or personifications of the Virtues. Through long years they have gone under the name of Héloïse and Abelard, those immortal lovers who fill such an unforgettable place in the history of French romance. But this is merely a sentimentalization, although at the same time it is a tribute to their beauty.

Michel Colombe died at some time after the year 1512 and while there is no disposition to attribute these heads to the hand of the master himself, they can be placed as products of his school. They have not the robust directness of the figures of the Virtues on the tomb of Francis II, but instead a subtler and softer beauty comparable to a group of school pieces, which centre around the famous Virgin of Olivet in the Louvre. Vitry ascribes this group tentatively to the hand of Guillaume Regnault, but the student is here still in the field of conjecture. The term, School of Michel Colombe, expresses more satisfactorily the exact provenance of these pieces.

The woman's head is remarkably close in type to the Virgin of Ecouen, also in the Louvre, and the Virgin of Mesland, closer perhaps to the latter than to the former. In all of them there are the same superficial likenesses: the hair parted in the middle and drawn over the ears, framing the face on both sides; the same treatment of the mouth, nose and the sockets of the eyes, the same softening of planes. But there is more than that. They are infused with the same spirit.

The likeness to some of the sculpture in the church of Brou has been suggested. It must be remembered that Michel Colombe was employed by Marguerite of Austria in this great project and his plans for the tomb of Philibert of Savoy were only brought to an end in 1512. No actual work was done by him. Conrad Meit, a Fleming, and some Italian workmen finally fashioned the memorials. But among the artists must have been some close follower of Michel Colombe, for certain of the pieces stand apart from the general mass of the work. Such a piece as the St. Madeleine on the tomb of Philibert is purely a product of the school of the Loire. It is with this figure that the woman's head, presented by Mr. Mather, so closely accords. In fact the headdress is almost identical, caught in front by a simple jewel. It has the recognizable features com-

mon in the followers of Colombe as well as the extreme sensitiveness which marks the Museum piece. It would be pleasant indeed, if it were not impossible, to assert definitely that our pieces came from Brou. No history came with them, but they are in the style of a group of figures there and are certainly worthy of that magnificent church which Didron called "the last and splendid adieu to Gothic in France."

The head of the man may seem at first to be more realistic than that of the woman. But on further study the same sensitiveness and delicacy of touch becomes evident. They must have been by the same hand. At the same time there is also an obvious relationship with the sculpture of the kneeling Louis XII upon his funeral monument in the church of St. Denis.

The woman's head is a most interesting document of the costume of the time. With the sixteenth century came in the cap covering the ears and more or less following the form of the head. This is as characteristic of its time as the extravagancies of the hennin were of the fifteenth. The cap or coife is finished with a broad solid border turned back in a point at the top and held by a jewelled pin, the hair being further covered with inter-twining ribbons, which might have been of gold or silver tissue. From the back of the headdress the hair falls in a braid down the back.

As the woman's head is a charming document in the history of costume, so both pieces are worthy examples of that final flowering of Gothic art which was not to die until the full fruition time. Fashioned between the years 1510 and 1535 they are typical of the spirit which Michel Colombe and his followers brought into being, and which stemmed for a final moment the onrushing tide of the Renaissance.

W. M. M.

DUTCH GRAPHIC ART

Revolutionary art appears to be lifting its head even in the traditionally staid Netherlands; at least some of the items in the present exhibition of Dutch Graphic Arts in Gallery XI seem raucous-voiced, set down as they are among the usual Dutch subjects which are handled as we expect them to be from our knowledge of Dutch paintings. Many schools and many tendencies seem to enter in; old traditions confront the most modernistic out-croppings: it is a very restless, uneven showing